THE SHAPE OF SALVATION
Mark 2:1-12, Ezekiel 1:26-2:1
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All things considered Ezekiel did what any man might do. He had a bizarre vision which included wind and fire and four creatures with wings, human hands and faces. He saw four strange wheels and a throne in the sky and the likeness of a human form seated on the throne. He heard the sound of thunder and a voice. And in a classic understatement Ezekiel said, "When I saw it I fell on my face."

Ezekiel was in what we know as an "altered state of consciousness": which interestingly, was the topic of an article in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine. Written by Andrew Greeley and William McCready, the article explored the esoteric world of mystical experiences and concluded that four out of ten Americans have had at least one such experience. Their extensive research resulted in the finding that wherever the place and whatever the trigger and whoever the person, there run through the accounts certain common themes - joy, light, peace, fire, warmth, unity, certainty, confidence, rebirth." (New York Times Magazine: 1/26/75 p 12 Are we a Nation of Mystics?)

In any event, the experience of the Prophet which is recounted in detail in the first chapter of Ezekiel is not unlike what happens apparently to a lot of people and what is becoming an increasingly fashionable expression of religion in our day. And his response to this overwhelming experience of the divine was, I submit, quite normal. He fell on his face. What happened next, however, is particularly intriguing. The voice of God which he heard earlier now ordered him to stand up; "Son of man, stand upon your feet and I will speak to you." That is to say, the voice told him to act normally, to be himself, so that God could get on with the real reason for the experience - namely the matter of Ezekiel's future. Ezekiel had assumed the traditional posture of reverence and piety, the proper attitude in the presence of the divine. But he was not allowed to maintain that position for long: he was not permitted, that is, to enjoy the "altered state of consciousness." If he was going to be God's man it would be on his feet, not groveling in the dust. And when he stood up the voice said:"I send you to the people of Israel - to a nation of rebels."

The New Testament Lesson this morning tells a story which in many ways is remarkably similar: an account of another man encountering the divine and being given his salvation. Four men brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus. Unable to squeeze him through the crowded door of the Capernaum house, they removed a part of the roof and lowered him through the opening on his pallet. They were determined friends, not about to be dissuaded. And when Jesus saw the degree of their commitment he said to the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven." Now, no one had said anything about sin, nor had anyone asked for forgiveness. Everything about the scenario would seem to indicate that the four friends hoped that Jesus would restore the paralytic to health. The sense of Jesus' statement "your sins are forgiven" is - you are alright, you are no longer a prisoner of your past, you are acceptable to God, you are whole, healed and free from your paralysis.

We do not always understand the dynamic of that because we do not share the view which was current in the New Testament times, that physical illness is the result of sin. But his contempories knew that he was saying and in case anyone failed to get the point he said it another way; "Rise, take up your pallet and go home."

And so we now have two men, both prone, humble, passive, inactive, standing erect as a result of an encounter with the divine. Their experiences differed in detail: one highly mystical and curious - the other rather down-to-earth and straightforward. But the result is the same - salvation: and the shape of it has something to do with growing, becoming, living, doing in an active sense, and not remaining a passive recipient.

Let me add a third scenario to these two. Several years ago a small book about a bird took the country by storm. Everybody read it and everybody had something to say about it. Some saw it as a powerful paraphrase of the Gospel: others saw it as a sentimental but basically harmless exercise in simplicity. Everyone liked the pictures. In any event, Jonathon Livingston Seagull, you will recall, was a most remarkable bird. An outcast because he refused to live within the carefully prescribed limits of a seagull's life, Jonathon taught himself to fly - really fly - at speeds unheard of for a seagull. He freed himself from habit and boredom and tradition and discovered that he was capable of doing things no seagull ever had imagined. Near the end of the book, as Jonathon is instructing other young outcasts in the art of living and flying, a gull with a broken wing presents himself: And a conversation ensues that sounds familiar.

> "Help me" said Kirk, wobbling across the sand, dragging his left wing....."help me" he said in the way the dying speak.
> "Come along then" said Jonathon. "Climb with me away from the ground and we'll begin."
> "You don't understand. My wing, I can't move my wing."
> "You have the freedom to be yourself, your true self here and now."
> "Are you saying I can fly?"
> "I am saying you are free."
> As simply and quickly as that, Kirk Maynard Gull spread his wing and lifted effortlessly into the night air.

The common, and important, theme in the three anecdotes: Ezekiel, the paralytic and Jonathon Livingston Seagull is that people are capable of becoming more than they are: that life can be lived and experienced at a depth of meaning and a pinnacle of accomplishment that most of us are unwilling to attempt. To put it in the more proper vocabulary of theology, to experience God is to become: to be saved is to launch into a life-long process of becoming. Or better yet, in a delightful vignette, "Being saved is like being pregnant. Something has happened to you, but not everything that's going to." (John Killinger, Alive Now, Winter 1972)

Ezekiel had to stand up: the paralytic got up and walked home: Kirk Gull discovered that he could fly. There is something inherent about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that ought to be having the same kind of effect with us. There is something about the shape of salvation that is expansive and exhilarating: and there is something about being a recipient of salvation that is incomplete until we find ourselves standing up and walking, or flying, or leaving our crutches behind. To borrow from the words of Jesus in the Gospel according to John, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

And yet, "salvation" - that most misunderstood of religious words, doesn't often come out that way at all. Instead of this positive, joyous, liberating new possibility, the shape of salvation as I perceive it is rather flat: and the feel of it is rather uninteresting, restrictive, even grim. It is ordinarily understood as something that will happen after we die. When we try to discuss what it might mean in the present tense it always sounds negative: that is, you can tell a person who has it by all the things he no longer does. As a boy I quickly perceived that my friends who were always talking about being saved were the ones who never seemed to have any fun. And I deduced that whatever else salvation might be, it was pretty boring: a deduction that has been confirmed by the people who still do all the talking about salvation.

What does the Bible say? What is the shape of salvation? The meaning of common words often changes over the centuries and it is instructive to go back to the roots. The root word for salvation in the Old Testament, for instance, means "to develop without hindrance - or to have victory in battle." Thus, David gained salvation when he won a battle. Likewise, "to save another is to communicate to him one's own prevailing strength." (Theological Word Book of the Bible, Richardson, p 219)

In the Old Testament God is saviour and he literally saves people from some very real perils: disease, disaster, famine, enemies. The primary salvation event in the Old Testament, however, is the Exodus. Somehow Moses persuaded a rag tag tribe of slaves in Egypt that they had it in them to stand up and walk: to leave their slavery and walk North to something called a promised land. With the Egyptians hot on their trail they made it across the Sea of Reeds and their pursuers did not. They were free. God saved them that day. But a lot more happened than deliverance from an enemy. They were saved, of course. But in the process they became a nation - a people. To be saved meant to become something none of them had any right to imagine they could become. In the Old Testament, salvation means to grow, to become: for Israel it meant becoming a nation with a grand and glorious mission to perform in the history of mankind.

The New Testament, however, was written at a time when that idea had been replaced with another concept of salvation. The Jews had tied the idea of salvation to the political fortunes of the nation. And when those fortunes fared badly salvation was postponed to some day in the future: the last day, the judgement day, if not in this world - then in the next.

It was in this climate that Jesus lived and did his teaching. He affirmed what was good about the new idea of salvation; that is, that it is not confined to history, nor to an individual's life-time. He taught that salvation does have to do with death and beyond. But he returned to that older basic idea as well: that salvation is immediate; that the Kingdom of God is present as well as future.

Salvation for Jesus meant freedom from the anxiety and fear of death - a reality for every man and woman who ever lived. We can hide from it for a while, but one day a man knows that he's going to die and from that day forward that knowledge remains in a special corner of his consciousness. It can come to have a power of its own until we feel enslaved and trapped by it. And so to know that death has no power, that the love of God which called us into being will protect us through death and beyond is literally to be saved: it is, literally, to be free. That is basic to the shape of salvation.

But there is more: that much alone is incomplete. We were created for more than obsession with our own death. We have within each of us an unquenchable will to be - to live. Dostoevsky, in The Brothers Karamazov, has Ivan say, "I have asked myself many times if there is anything in life that could ever destroy this tremendous, perhaps indecent thirst for life within me....I have come to the conclusion that there is not." (Ibid. p 43)

And so the shape of salvation must include not only freedom from the fear of death but freedom to become all that we can become: freedom from anything that restricts us from being human now. That's not a new idea. As long ago as 185 A.D., the Christian Bishop Irenaeus put it in these words, "The Glory of God is man fully alive,"

That, it seems to me, is a relavant and important word of God to twentieth century Christians. God's gift of salvation intends, not to restrict and confine us - to be saved means more than having a new list of prohibitions. God saves us in order to free us to become all that we can become. That's important today because philosophically, we seem to be moving in the opposite direction. Rollo May, in his excellent book, Love and Will discusses the prevailing dilemma of our time. He writes, "....modern man's pervasive tendency - which has become almost an endemic disease in the middle of the twentieth century - (is) to see himself as passive, - the willy-nilly product of the powerful juggernaut of psychological drives and economic forces".(p 183) May suggests that it is time for modern man to stand up and be; to recover the ability to will, to grow, to change, to take charge; to see one's life in terms of its possibilities, rather than simply giving in to forces that appear to be out of control.

And yet it's difficult to be human - to be fully ourselves - when we are so busy: so frantic; so hurried and harried about succeeding: it's difficult to be free when we feel trapped economically, professionally, socially, psychologically. John Ciardi, always on the mark, said one time, "An ulcer, gentlemen, is an unkissed imagination taking its revenge for having been jilted. It is an unwritten poem, a neglected music, an unpainted water color, an undanced dance. It is a declaration from the mankind of man that a clear spring of joy has not been tapped, and that it just break through muddily, on its own." (Models for Ministers 2/23/75)

What keeps us from being all that we could be? What prevents us from being fully alive, fully human? The shape of salvation is designed to free us from whatever it is. Someone has taken a litany of the Church and rewritten it in these suggestive words:

> "From slavery to schedules, lists, and deadlines,
> from the tyranny of the telephone and the rule of wristwatches,
> from the pharohs of franticness and fragmentation,
> from bondage to busyness,
> to all all things that simply must be done before we stop to think, or feel or care, Good Lord, deliver us and make us free to be Human.
> From the prisons of old patterns - locked in ways of responding to each other,
> frozen points of view -
> from the domination of our moods -
> the blahs - the tension - the gnawing of worry.
> Good Lord deliver us ...." (Ibid. p 29-30)

Jesus saved men from whatever was holding them back, whatever was restricting them from being fully human. He did it by loving. His love turned fishermen into fearless advocates of a new cause; a crippled tent maker named Paul into an eloquent philosopher, a desperate prostitute named Mary into a saint. The shape of salvation for them was as different as they were different from each other. But for all of them it meant growing, becoming, stretching, living at a level then never before contemplated.

A paralytic, a man who could not move, was lowered into the presence of Jesus by four friends, And Jesus loved him. He did not pity him. He did not say "you poor, wretched man: what a sad, unfortunate situation to be unable to move." Jesus loved that man so much that he said "Get up...you are free - free to take charge of your life and to change it - free to be the man you want to be. Stand up - carry your bed - that symbol of the past - and go home."

So it can be for you and for me if we will open our lives to that searching, honest, life-giving love. God wants us to be everything we are capable of becoming. He wants us to live the life he has given. He wants us to throw ourselves into life, holding nothing back; being the best school teacher, doctor, homemaker, carpenter, lawyer, Minister we can possibly be.

His saving love in Jesus Christ is what calls it out of us. That is salvation - shaped to fit you and me. God loves us with a love big enough to believe in us and to die for us.

"I say to you, rise, take your pallet and go home." And he rose, and immediately took up the pallet and went out before them all; so that they were amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:11-12)

Amen

Father, we would be free. We would become all that you created us to become. Open us to your love - the love that calls us to live fully, in Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Amen